

## PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS IN PAUL'S THEOLOGY

### *Vocabulary*

#### Primary Words

Paul uses several synonyms to describe a group of beings who exert power and authority. Many of these words are used extensively outside of the special meaning discussed here, but there are certain characteristics that distinguish “principalities and powers” in Paul’s writings. All these words share a component of meaning (*authority*) and are often distinguished by their occurrence in plural forms and in combination with one another.

Ἀρχή (55/11)<sup>1</sup> has two basic meanings: *beginning* and *authority*. Outside of Paul’s writings, ἀρχή almost exclusively means *beginning*, usually in a chronological sense (Mt. 19.4; Jn. 1.1; Heb. 2.3). Luke uses ἀρχή for *authority*, both personified (Lk. 12.11) and in the abstract (Lk. 20.20). Jude uses it for a position of authority (6). Paul, however, uses ἀρχή predominantly to mean *personified authority*. In his letters, it is almost always plural in form or used with

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<sup>1</sup> The first number is the total New Testament occurrences; the second is the total Pauline occurrences.

παῶς to imply plurality.<sup>2</sup> In these plural uses, ἀρχή always appears in a list of synonyms sharing the meaning authority.

Ἄρχων (37/4) always refers to a person who is a position of authority. This person can be either spiritual (Beelzebub, Mt. 12.24) or human (Nicodemus, Jn. 3.1). Paul's usage of ἄρχων is perfectly consistent with the other New Testament writers; he refers to either supernatural (Eph. 2.2) or human (Rom. 13.3) authority figures.

Δύναμις (119/49) refers primarily to *power* or *ability*<sup>3</sup> and, derivatively, to the authority that comes from that power or ability. This power is most often divine or supernatural (the Holy Spirit's power, Lk. 1.35; Acts 1.8), although human ability is in view in some passages (business sense, Mt. 25.15). In the Gospels and Acts, δυνάμεις (pl.) often refers to miracles: thus, the power in view usually has a supernatural source (Mt. 7.22; Lk. 10.13; Acts 8.13). For Paul, δύναμις (sg.) covers the same ground: it is most often supernatural power (Rom. 1.4; I Cor. 1.18; Eph. 3.16) and occasionally human ability (I Cor. 4.19; II Cor. 8.3). Δυνάμεις (pl.), however, gains a new nuance in one of Paul's letters. Though most of its occurrences maintain the standard definition of *miracles*, Romans 8.38 uses δυνάμεις with reference to personified heavenly powers: it is parallel to

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<sup>2</sup> Ἀρχή appears in the singular when Paul uses it to mean *beginning* (Php. 4.15; Col. 1.18).

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Friberg, "δύναμις" in *Analytical Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2006.

ἄγγελοι and ἀρχαί. Thus, δύναμις takes on a specialized meaning when used in conjunction with other power/principalities synonyms.

Ἐξουσία (102/27) means “authority to rule, right to control.”<sup>4</sup> This authority applies to both decision and action.<sup>5</sup> Ἐξουσία usually refers to the abstract idea of authority (Mt. 7.29; Acts 5.4) but like δύναμις it can also refer to people who bear that authority (Lk. 12.11; I Pet. 3.22). This same pattern holds true in Paul’s letters. The potter has *authority* over clay (Rom. 9.21); *authority figures* merit obedience (Tit. 3.1). Like previous words, ἐξουσία (pl.) sometimes occurs in synonym lists, most often with ἀρχαί (pl.). These ἐξουσία / ἀρχαί passages form the core of Paul’s theology of principalities and powers (Eph. 3.10; 6.12; Col. 1.16; 2.15).

Θρόνος (62/1) means *throne*. It can refer literally to the furniture itself (Acts 2.30; Rev. 5.1), or metonymically to the authority (Lk. 1.32; Heb. 1.8) or the ruler (Heb. 1.4) associated with a given throne. Paul uses this word only once (plural θρόνοι, Col. 1.16) to refer to the persons who bear authority; he uses it in conjunction with ἐξουσία and ἀρχαί.

Κοσμοκράτωρ (1/1) is a Pauline *hapax legomena* (Eph. 6.12). As a compound, its meaning is fairly transparent: “one holding power over the

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<sup>4</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, “ἐξουσία,” 37.35 in *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*.

<sup>5</sup> Friberg, “ἐξουσία.”

world.”<sup>6</sup> It refers to evil powers and appears in a list alongside of ἀρχάς and ἐξουσίας.

Κυριότης (4/2) means *dominion* or *lordship*. In Peter and Jude, it occurs in the singular and refers to the abstract (II Pet. 2.10; Jd. 8). In Paul, it occurs in the plural and, following the pattern of previous words, it refers to personified dominion (that is, to the one who exercises dominion, Eph. 1.21; Col. 1.16) and occurs in lists with words like ἐξουσίαι and ἀρχαί.

#### Related Words

Ἄγγελός occurs in a list with ἀρχαί and δυνάμεις in Rom. 8.38. If the contrast pattern in this verse is consistent, ἄγγελοι serves as an antonym to ἀρχαί.<sup>7</sup> In Paul’s theology, God’s ἄγγελοι play a largely passive role: they are never more than observers (I Cor. 4.9; 11.10; I Tim. 3.16) or messengers (Gal. 1.8; 3.19). In contrast to these holy ἄγγελοι, fallen angels (δαίμονια, ἄγγελος σατανᾶ) actively oppose God’s plan by harassing (II Cor. 12.7) and deceiving God’s people (I Tim. 4.1).

Στοιχεῖα is a difficult word to define. At the most basic level, στοιχεῖα are elementary things. In II Peter, they are the very elements from which the earth is composed (3.10-12); in Hebrews, they are basic principles (5.12). In Paul, however, there may be another referent for στοιχεῖα. In Galatians 4, it appears

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<sup>6</sup> Friberg, “κοσμοκράτωρ.”

<sup>7</sup> Θάνατος vs. ζωή; ἄγγελοι vs. ἀρχαί; and ἐνεστῶτα vs. μέλλοντα.

that Paul intends to use στοιχεῖα as part of a dual contrast. On one hand, Jews were under the Law until the coming of Christ; on the other hand, Gentiles were enslaved to στοιχεῖα until the coming of Christ. Both the Law and στοιχεῖα are forms of bondage. Στοιχεῖα is linked with pagan idolatry by the phrase τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς (4.8) and might reflect pagan ideas linking elements of the earth to cosmic spiritual powers.<sup>8</sup> Colossians 2 uses στοιχεῖα in the same context as key terms like ἐξουσίαι and ἀρχαί. Paul's argument in this chapter rests on a link between the "elements" and the powers. Because Christ is superior to all ἐξουσίαι and ἀρχαί, Christians are not bound by στοιχεῖα (8, 10, 15, 20). Since στοιχεῖα is parallel to παράδοσιν (tradition, 8) and δογματίζεσθε (obligation, 20), it is likely that στοιχεῖα are the principles by which ἐξουσίαι and ἀρχαί exert their authority.

#### *Pauline Emphases*

Paul uses "principalities and powers" language with reference to two types of authorities: human and supernatural. Some passages speak exclusively of human rulers (Rom. 13.1; Tit. 3.1) and enjoin Christians to submit (ὑποτάσσω) to them because their authority is derived from God. Other passages refer exclusively to spiritual powers, popularly called *angels* and *demons* today (Eph. 3.10; 6.12; Col. 2.15). These powers see God's glory in the church and are subject

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<sup>8</sup> This is the argument proposed by Christopher Forbes in "Pauline Demonology and/or Cosmology? Principalities, Powers and the Elements of the World in Their Hellenistic Context," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 85 (March 1, 2002): 51-73.

to Christ. The remaining passages are broad enough to include both human and supernatural powers (Rom. 8.38-39; I Cor. 15.24; Eph. 1.21; Col. 1.16; 2.20). These passages emphasize an “already, not yet” tension regarding powers (especially hostile ones): they have already been disarmed (ἀπεκδύομαι, Col. 2.15) and are unable to separate believers from Christ (Rom. 8.39) who created them (Col. 1.16) and is far above them (ὑπεράνω, Eph. 1.21), but their ability to act and exert power has not yet been destroyed (I Cor. 15.24). Thus, hostile forces (both human and spiritual) can pose an actual danger to believers. Believers are given a two-fold response: obey human powers because their authority is derived from God, and do not despair under hostile treatment because Christ has authority over all earthly and spiritual forces.

### *Contemporary Significance*

#### Roman Imperial Cult

Rightly understanding Paul’s view of principalities and powers affects a modern trend in interpretation. Recent works by Crossan, Horsley, and Wright have suggested that Paul’s proclamation of the Gospel of Christ was actually a clever form of political subversion.<sup>9</sup> Paul, however, clearly taught the God-given

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<sup>9</sup> John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus’s Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004).

Richard A. Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1997); *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2000); *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2004).

authority of political powers (Rom. 13). Even in the face of the growing prevalence of the Roman cult of emperor worship, Paul showed no desire whatsoever for overthrowing or overturning the government. He simply maintained a firm stance against any form of idolatry<sup>10</sup> and commanded prayer for the authorities that unbelievers worshiped (I Tim. 2.1-2).

### Politics

American Christians face a “danger” every four years: an ungodly leader might be elected president. Paul’s theology of principalities and powers should inform a believer’s response to hostile human authority, not only in the White House, but in any position of national, state, or local office, from politician to policeman. First, the terminology is so broad and general that no official authority figure can be excluded. Paul repeatedly qualifies ἐξουσία with πᾶς. All authority is derivative from God’s authority; therefore, all authority commands a Christian’s cooperation. Second, God is the ultimate authority and has veto power over any human ruler. Thus the apostles rightly disobeyed the Jewish council’s cease and desist order on their evangelization (Acts 5.29). Believers today must likewise disregard any human command that contradicts God’s revealed will.

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N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> As was previously noted, Paul’s use of the word στοιχεῖα forms a link between the slavery enforced by idolatry and human tradition (Gal. 4; Col. 2), and Christ’s triumph over all hostile forces.

## Christian Fiction

A third area of contemporary significance is demonology. There is a vein of modern Christian fiction that shows an unhealthy preoccupation with vivid description of and detailed speculation about demonic activity in the world today. Frank Peretti's *Darkness* novels, Bill Myers's *Forbidden Doors* series, and Eric Wilson's *Jerusalem's Undead Trilogy* – these are just a few examples of the many Christian novels that draw their content from conjectures about the realm of hostile supernatural forces. This is a glaring departure from Paul's careful vagueness about spiritual warfare. Paul gives a command to stand against ἀρχάς, ἐξουσίας, and κοσμοκράτορας, not a dark, horrifying tale of suspense and terror. Paul most certainly acknowledges the presence and power of hostile supernatural forces; even more certainly, however, he asserts the absolute authority of Christ over those forces. Christ has already stripped and shamed them (Col. 2.15); at the end, he will destroy them (I Cor. 15.24). Demonic activity is not the heart-racing horror evoked by an unstoppable evil power; it is the last vestiges of guerilla warfare waged by an already defeated enemy.



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